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Standing Tall Again

Filed under CORPSMAN, FAMILIES, MILITARY MEDICINE

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By Chief Yeoman Javier Rodriguez Santiago



Chief Yeoman Javier Rodriguez Santiago is a member of the Naval Medical Center San Diego “Wolfpack” wheelchair basketball team. (Photo courtesy of Safe Harbor)

Editor's note: Navy Chief Yeoman Javier Rodriguez Santiago was injured in a motorcycle accident in January 2011. After the accident, he underwent multiple surgeries and was confined to a wheelchair. In this blog post he details the reasoning behind his recent decision to amputate, as well as the aftermath of that decision. He is enrolled in Navy Wounded Warrior – [Safe Harbor](#), the Navy's wounded warrior support program.

While I was having reconstructive surgeries for my legs in 2011 and early 2012, my orthopedic doctor at [Tripler Army Medical Center](#) mentioned that one possible outcome – a last resort – was the amputation of my left leg. My wife, Edna, had the same reaction I did: “No

way.”

In November 2012, Navy Wounded Warrior – Safe Harbor hosted the Wounded Warrior Pacific Trials in Hawaii. During the luau that kicked off the event, Edna and I watched amputees walking around without a problem. Edna’s immediate thought was, “You should amputate!” I laughed at her quick reaction, but after meeting wounded warriors during the trials who understood and shared my struggles, my feelings towards amputation shifted 180 degrees.

In May 2013, I participated in the Warrior Games, where I represented the Navy in hand cycle; track and field; and sitting volleyball competitions. After the event, I was 100 percent sure that amputation was the right course. My mother had attended the Games, and I was able to explain my decision by showing her the amputees’ great quality of life.

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After the Games my family moved from Hawaii to San Diego. I attended several appointments with orthopedic and plastic surgeons at [Naval Medical Center San Diego \(NMCS D\)](#), and we discussed different possible surgeries like fusion, osteotomy and skin grafts. I remained firm in my decision: I wanted to amputate.

However, on July 22, about five minutes before my amputation surgery, Edna showed some doubt, which also transferred to me. My wonderful doctors noticed it, and they talked to us and got us back on track. A few hours later, I woke up as a Left Above Knee Amputee (LAKA). I didn't feel like a LAKA; it still felt like my leg was there. This is called "phantom pain," which I had expected.

One week after the surgery Navy chief petty officer selection results were published. I had been selected! It was great news that kept me from thinking about pain, which, during the first several weeks after surgery, was significant.

Six weeks after my surgery, I began getting fitted with a socket to use with my prosthetic. My goal was to stand for my chief petty officer pinning ceremony. With only a couple of days of notice, the prosthetic department fitted me with a new limb. I was able to wear my prosthetic and, with little practice, stand at my pinning ceremony on Sept. 13.

After my surgery, I also joined the NMCS D wheelchair basketball team, the "Wolfpack." It has been a great challenge to train to be as good as all my teammates. During the first couple of weeks I was tentative because of my surgery, but my teammates are showing me the ropes and I've been overcoming my fears and playing more aggressively.

I have been training with my prosthetic every day slowly increasing the time I can use it. There are many obstacles I'm still working through, such as walking without a cane, climbing steps, getting in and out of cars, wearing the prosthetic with different types of clothing, and phantom pains. Keeping prosthesis and physical therapy appointments is very important so that I can make adjustments, practice news skills and address any pain I'm having.

All in all, amputation was the best decision for me. Every day I'm able to use my prosthetic more often. Being ambulatory again feels great, and I love feeling tall



Navy Chief Yeoman Javier Rodriguez Santiago with his family. (Photo courtesy of Safe Harbor)

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once more. My family and friends from all over the world have been and are very supportive of my decision and always keep me motivated to push forward.

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